

Once again, tragedy has struck Colorado, and parents want to do the best they can to help their children process these events. When disasters strike, most of us are inclined to turn to the TV, radio, or internet and follow the latest news. Unfortunately, children often do not understand that what they are seeing is one event played repeatedly. One five-year old, after the events of 9/11, believed that multiple planes were hitting buildings everywhere in the world after watching continuous coverage of the story. Having the TV and radio on continuously, during these events, re-exposes us and our children to the trauma and the accompanying feelings. Limiting our exposure is good, but limiting the exposure of our children is most important.

Children will often take their cue about a situation from their parents, especially when it is upsetting. While again it is natural for adults to process these events with other adults, either in person or on the phone, if children are within earshot of these conversations, it can increase their anxiety.

However, what do we say to our children when terrible things happen? As parents, we need to answer their questions honestly, but at an appropriate developmental level. It is also okay to admit that we do not have all the answers. This was a very unusual tragedy perpetrated by one individual. Children need reassurance that the likelihood of this happening again is very slight. Some children may need physical comfort along with words of reassurance. Parents may find them acting out, using art or making up stories to express their emotions. Children may want to spend time closer to their parents. Others will need reassurance that their feelings are “normal.” Encourage children to express all they are feeling and to ask questions.

Responding to children’s questions and concerns can continue for some time. This may be an opportunity to discuss the family’s emergency disaster plan, or devise one. Creating a plan can give both children and adults a sense of comfort and control. Children, like adults, often want to help in times of crisis. Finding a way to support the victims and their families through the appropriate agencies can be beneficial to our children’s healing, as well as ours. While continuing to reassure and answer questions, returning to normal activities and schedules will be helpful too.

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